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PLUS: SAWTOOTH ALPINE TROUT, WILD & SCENIC RIVERS ACT TURNS 50, FLOATING SOUL RIVER, PUBLIC LANDS ROAD TRIP, PACKRAFTING AND MORE

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Tim Romano photo

A GRATEFUL VIEW FROM DOWNSTREAM

The Wild & Scenic Rivers Act Turns 50

BY KARL MALCOLM

REGARDLESS OF THE TARGET OF DEVOTION, WORSHIP IS AN EXERCISE IN HUMILITY – in acknowledging that there are things bigger and more important than ourselves. For some, a physical house of worship, with walls, a ceiling and some stained glass, is the right setting for this sort of reflection. For others there is no human-made substitute for quiet woods or wild rivers. While physical houses of worship may be built, rebuilt and improved through the collection plate generosity of dedicated parishioners, the wall-less places of divine experience are prone more to degradation than to improvement. And they are irreplaceable. A fragile church is the curse of spiritual dedication to natural ground.

Places like these are shaped over timescales humans cannot fully comprehend, yet in our era it is people who know and celebrate them who serve as the keys to their persistence. Huge effort can be expended just swimming against the current, trying to keep what we have as pressures for change ebb and flood through time. The investment of such energy is nothing new.

Sam Lungren photo

In June of 1957, *Montana Wildlife*, the official publication of the then-named Montana Fish and Game Department, published a six-page letter by one of the great students of untamed places, making a well-reasoned case for holding against change on behalf of the nation's last, best, free-flowing rivers.

In his letter, famed biologist John Craighead provided his account of a five-day raft trip down the Middle Fork of the Flathead River during the preceding summer of 1956. He took the trip with a group of friends and colleagues to evaluate the wild river's recreational potential – which must have been, a least a little bit, an excuse to claim fishing as serious work. It was a timely trip regardless of their motivations. The Army Corps of Engineers was planning to construct the Spruce Park Dam on that stretch in the Flathead National Forest, between the Bob Marshall Wilderness and Glacier National Park – a project that would back the river up for 11 miles, while also blocking the passage of fish species that evolved there over dam-free millennia.

Craighead's article included three black and white photographs. One shows two distant figures in a raft floating toward the viewer, ant-like in the rugged whitewater canyon cliffs surrounding them. Another depicts a lone angler casting upstream in quiet water alongside a raft, resting beneath a tangled logjam. The third picture shows a hunched man in a wide-brimmed hat straining to lift a leg-sized fish, with a caption reading simply, "A big bull trout comes from the clear water of a wild river."

Beyond praising the "unsurpassed beauty," "superb scenery," and "abundant fish and wildlife" of the Middle Fork country, Craighead's letter suggested generally, "No single group or interest should impound a 'wild' river or open it up with roads until a thorough land use survey has been made which would take into account forest and watershed values, the wildlife and recreational potential, educational and aesthetic values, and, of course, the value of the water for irrigation, power, and flood control when impounded."

He went on to argue that such an evaluation should focus on the long game, writing, "Perhaps even more important is the need to evaluate these areas not solely in terms of the present, but in terms of 50 to 60 years from now. In other words, values determined from comprehensive land use surveys made at the present time should be projected 50 years ahead and these values then used to formulate and determine our present action."

Reading Craighead's words now, 60 years after their publication, elicits respect and gratitude for the thinkers and leaders of his time. It would be ridiculous to argue that the value of our nation's last wild rivers has done anything but skyrocket in the years since Craighead's testament or that their trajectory of value will level off. Ever. He predicted a future that has come to be, writing, "There is strong indication that the recreational industry, now ranking third in Montana, will continue to grow. The demand for wild areas will increase and these areas must serve not just a state or local area, but the nation."

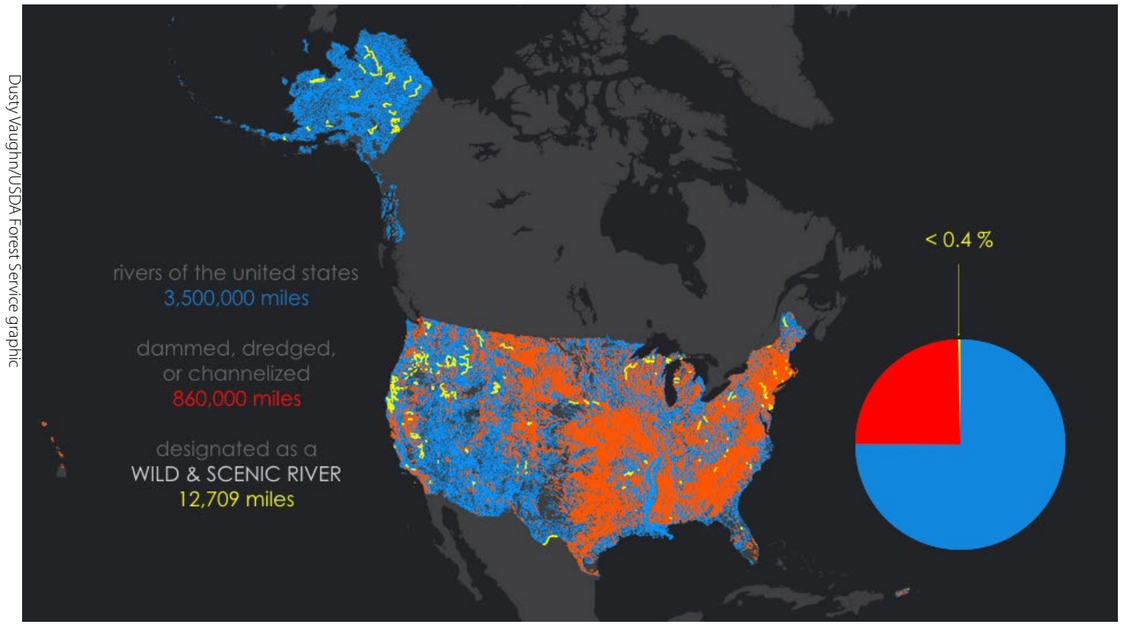
Tourism now ranks as the second largest industry in Montana, surpassed only by agriculture, with visitors to the state spending roughly $3 billion in 2016. Nationally, based on newly released data from the Department of Commerce, outdoor recreation contributes $637 billion per year to the American economy – more than 2 percent of our national gross domestic product. Our public lands and waters are the backbone.

What is most impressive about Craighead's letter is that it serves as much more than an argument on behalf of the Middle Fork. Some conservationists point to his recounted float trip as an early seed of our national Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, a law declaring as the policy of the United States that "certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

Craighead called the few remaining wild rivers of his time, "a species now close to extinction." The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was the response of a nation that came to realize and share this concern – and translate it into action. Eight years after the *Montana Wildlife* article was published, the issue had risen to such prominence that President Johnson called for protective rivers legislation during his 1965 State of the Union Address. Three years and 16 versions later, a bill establishing the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, sponsored by Democratic Sen. Frank Church and Republican Rep. John Saylor, was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Johnson on Oct. 2, 1968. The act was largely shaped by the thinking and writing of John Craighead and his twin brother and fellow conservation icon, Frank, both of whom dedicated themselves to the wild rivers cause for well over a decade.

For some places the legislation came late. By 1968, extensive human modification of the nation's waterways left slim pickings for protection in a wild, free-flowing state. Today, out of roughly 3.5 million miles of rivers in the United States, about 860,000 (25 percent) have been dramatically altered through damming, dredging and channelizing. Changes to 600,000 of those river miles are attributable to more than 75,000 large dams built nationwide. When compared to those figures, the 12,734 river miles (.3 percent) designated under the act may seem paltry, but there are some serious gems in the mix – including the Three Forks of the Flathead Wild and Scenic River, a designation made in 1976 that included the Middle Fork. The act also established the global standard for national river protection systems, which serves as a model for countries around the world today.

Under the act, rivers are designated to protect and enhance their free-flowing condition, water quality and "outstandingly remarkable" natural, cultural and recreational values. This boils down, first and foremost, to just letting a river be a river, by protecting natural channel formation rather than dictating through human intervention how and where a river will flow. The concept



Dusty Vaughn/USDA Forest Service graphic

of "outstandingly remarkable values" is notable in that it protects specific values that are "rare, unique, or exemplary" on a regional or national scale – in other words, conserving the very best of the best in fisheries, wildlife, scenery, recreation, geology, and historic and cultural resources.

Segments are classified as one of three categories: wild, scenic or recreational, based on the level of development present in the river corridor at the time of designation. That baseline of development then serves as the minimum standard for management – in perpetuity. The Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Forest Service each work with numerous partner organizations to manage designated rivers, both on federal and non-federal lands.

Despite the small fraction of our national river network protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, stretches are accessible from most spots on the map. The national system today includes rivers in 40 states, plus Puerto Rico. Even major metropolitan areas like New York City, Los Angeles and Philadelphia have multiple designated rivers within 60 miles of town. Portland is particularly well off, with 16 designated stretches within 60 miles. And these rivers provide benefits even to those who will never visit them, with one in 10 people in the United States today drinking water that can be traced to a wild and scenic river.

For my buddies and me it was spring steelhead runs and squirrel, turkey and waterfowl hunting along the steep, sandy banks of the Manistee River in Michigan's Lower Peninsula that first drew our attention to a place protected by this legislation. Twenty-six miles of the Manistee were designated as wild and scenic in 1992, with an emphasis on "outstandingly remarkable" fish, wildlife and recreational values. Having the Manistee within jalopy distance was a point of gratitude for a group of friends who drove rust bucket pickup trucks that often shared birth years with their drivers. But we were both grateful and naïve. We didn't comprehend that, through the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, we were inheriting something special from a generation of thinkers who had people like us specifically in mind as future beneficiaries.

"Any outdoor pursuit which brings a [person] into intimate contact with natural scenery, natural forces, and the unaltered web of life is highly educational. The right to experience this should be as inalienable as freedom of worship. To preserve it is a trust falling to each succeeding generation," said John Craighead

As inalienable as freedom of worship.

It makes sense given that there are those of us whose connections to higher powers hinge on intimate contact with natural scenery, natural forces and the unaltered web of life.

There are a pair of popular concepts bandied about when watershed protection is being discussed: We all live downstream and we all live upstream. They are ideas so basic and overstated that they risk becoming cliché. But when considering the inheritance of a distinct, favorite stretch of river, time itself can take on a river-like quality that reaffirms these simple, elegant principles. People like the Craighead brothers, Sen. Church, Rep. Saylor and President Johnson are easily classified today as upstream benefactors, with places like the Middle Fork of the Flathead and the Manistee River a tangible trust flowing to successive generations of recipients – including us. This line of thinking then unavoidably underscores a conclusion that each generation, including ours, is positioned both to receive from upriver and to affect all those downstream – for better or worse.

So let's be wise and take note of the insight of our predecessors. This year let's celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act with our attention focused on year 100. With regard to wild rivers and otherwise, let's do everything we can to rank among those who are viewed favorably from downstream when our turn as generational trustees is over.

As we've been shown, there is no better legacy than leaving something irreplaceable behind when we go.

Karl is the regional wildlife ecologist for the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service and a life member of BHA. He is grateful for the privilege of working for you in helping care for our public lands and waters – the greatest public lands system on the planet.